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INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AS CURRICULUM ADVISERS FOR ACADEMIC WRITING COURSES: DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING STAFF-STUDENT PARTNERSHIPS

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the origins, design and implementation of a staff-student partnership project at Durham University English Language Centre (ELC). The objective was to improve the curriculum for a 25-session three-term EGAP course known as the Academic Writing Workshop (AWW). The project had its origins in the practitioner observation that a number of international students had helped with materials design by contributing disciplinary and cultural knowledge. Some students had even produced materials based on their disciplinary insights. To see if it was possible to turn these *ad hoc* contributions into more formally recognized curriculum enhancements, a short exploratory study was conducted in 2015. The success of the exploratory study led to the development of a pilot project which received funding from the UKCISA organization (<https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/>) for the academic year 2016-17.

PROJECT RATIONALE

What can EAP curriculum developers learn from students? In the traditional top-down ethos of HE discourse, students tend to be positioned as “novices” and teachers as “experts”, meaning that faculty take sole responsibility for matters of curriculum (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014). Although there are clarion calls for greater student involvement in curriculum planning (e.g. NUS, 2016), international students are not specifically called on to add their voices to the mix.

As an EAP teacher and curriculum writer and developer, I have found the range and depth of international students’ knowledge and skills to be impressive, particularly in the third undergraduate year and amongst postgraduates. This is due to the “cultural capital” that these students have accrued, even when their “linguistic capital”, perceived or actual, is lower than that of students whose first language is English (Bourdieu, 1986). International students on PhD courses, for example, might have previously been engaged in HE teaching and/or research (Montgomery, 2010). International postgraduates may also have prior disciplinary knowledge, and/or professional knowledge (*phronesis*) gained via jobs, internships, teaching and volunteer work (Oakeshott, 1962; Montgomery, 2010). International students often accumulate cross-cultural or even meta-cultural expertise through travel and exchanges (Louie, 2005). Many of my international students have technological expertise in areas such as web and app design or in digital research technologies such as SPSS, LaTeX, and Python. Finally, I have observed that many international students develop considerable disciplinary and genre writing expertise while studying in the host institution.

Although the nature of expertise is deeply contested (Cummings, 2013), all of these forms of student knowledge and skills are of great help to me as a curriculum designer and teacher. I wanted to develop a process by which this rich pool of knowledge could be used to enhance the curriculum for all the students on the AWW course.

FROM EXPLORATORY STUDY TO PILOT PROJECT

In the first stage of the exploratory study, three third-year undergraduates were invited to critique the main handout and PowerPoint of the first AWW session. The students were given the title of “Student Adviser” to add to their CVs. The students critiqued the materials in their own time and in their own way: two students were happy to work alongside staff in my office; one preferred to work at home. In the second stage, the students talked through their reactions to the materials. Audio recordings were made to ensure accuracy of interpretation.

The exploratory study worked well. All three students critiqued the materials in a constructive way and made suggestions for improvement based on discipline-specific insights. They also pointed out errors and discrepancies in my handouts and slides, and suggested self-study options to be added to the online supplementary materials. By far the most important contribution, however, were the audio recordings of “talk around text” in which Student Advisers explained in depth how tasks and texts worked in their discipline (Lillis, 2009). This simple ethnographically-grounded research method allowed me to give more nuanced discipline-based explanations to the next term’s AWW classes (Paltridge, Starfield & Hardy, 2016).

A pilot project was then designed underpinned by the staff-student partnership literature (especially Little, 2011; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014; and Brooman, Darwent & Pimor, 2015). Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten (2014) advise teachers to “start small” (p.133) when setting up staff-student partnerships for the first time, so a project team of three ELC staff members and six purposively-sampled international students was assembled. Students were given the title of Curriculum Adviser, as this suggested greater equality than the previous Student Adviser title. To ensure transparency, a Dropbox was opened containing all key documents except confidential student data. All e-mails pertaining to the project were also forwarded to the Curriculum Advisers. Finally, one of the Curriculum Advisers set up a closed Facebook group so that all the project participants could keep in touch.

A CURRICULUM ADVISER’S PERSPECTIVE: TAMARA BARAKAT

I was asked by Terri to join the project towards the end of the AWW in Term 2: it sounded meaningful and valuable so I wanted to be part of it. As the first step, we had an informal discussion about my background and interests, and I reflected on my learning experience in the AWW. We also talked about writing for Translation Studies, including the assignment challenges of translating Arabic-English texts. Terri didn’t know, for example, about the process of writing a translation commentary or about the use of footnotes for explaining translation decisions.

In the next step, I was asked to evaluate and review the same set of AWW materials that all the participants were given. I assumed that this was because Terri wanted to get a set of constants rather than variables at this stage. We arranged to meet again two weeks later and Terri made notes of suggested changes as well as points that I found useful in the lesson.

The third step was an interim stage while we waited for the other students to complete their critiques of the first session, as we were all working at different speeds to fit in with our workloads and commitments. Terri asked me to review a book about writing dissertations. I looked at the book and annotated it with sticky notes, but unfortunately at that time I was so busy writing my own dissertation that I didn’t have time to read the whole book. The general advice in the book was useful and quite comforting, but when I started writing, what I really needed from the book wasn’t there, as it was not specific enough for Durham requirements.

In the fourth project step, I was asked to choose as few or as many of the other AWW workshop sessions to critique as I wanted. I chose a lesson on argumentation, but felt that one of the sample texts on engineering was unsuitable for my discipline. I suggested that we should have a bigger range of texts in the materials.

Finally, all the Curriculum Advisers met in a focus group. We discussed how much we valued having our voices being heard and working in a partnership. It was interesting for us to be part of something where we were co-constructing knowledge and we valued having a closer relationship with faculty members in the project team.

This project involves students from very diverse academic, professional, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, which means that the input we provide will be very rich and will lead to realistic and positive change. HE institutions in the UK need to consult with international students to learn what they need and want. They should not make assumptions about the needs of their very diverse students. As partners in this project, we can employ our special skills to provide input on the curriculum.

The project allows us to be creative. For example, I suggested that the ELC should publish short videos made by students. Terri has trialled this idea with one member of our project team this year and she plans to develop a larger-scale video project next year. The project also provided an opportunity for us to foster personal, academic and professional transferable skills, such as collaborating as a group, building peer relationships, and communicating together. We were encouraged to think critically as we evaluated the teaching material and presented our views at conferences.

Most importantly, the project gave us a real and tangible opportunity to be heard. It allowed us to feel that the university has trust, faith, and appreciation in their abilities and contributions. We feel like we are part of a significant project and that we have the opportunity to create change. We have the power to co-create, not just knowledge, learning, and curricula, but also to shape the educational institution itself. What we do will have a far-reaching impact on how courses are designed and taught, and also on the perception of what student representation and partnership really mean.

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

This staff-student partnership has brought a large number of benefits to the curriculum. Curriculum Advisers pointed out the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the materials. Everyone wanted to see a greater range of disciplines represented in the materials and a greater range of text-types: they felt that the course was too focussed on a single genre, namely the argumentative social-science style essay. They also wanted to see a combination of good and bad examples, as they felt that they learnt the most from seeing both. All Curriculum Advisers wanted the lessons to contain more visually interesting PowerPoint slides. Several Curriculum Advisers asked for a bigger range of online resources: the current Blackboard site is little more than a document repository. Finally, most Curriculum Advisers wanted to see a bigger range of optional homework tasks with no specific deadlines, based on sections of the assignments on which they were working.

The Curriculum Advisers thought that students would be better placed to make technological improvements than the ELC staff. To develop better online resources, as Tamara has mentioned above, it was suggested that video clips could accompany the materials in the students' first language, with subtitles in English. It was also suggested that Curriculum Advisers could observe the teaching staff and make recommendations for lesson changes. Most importantly, the Curriculum Advisers pointed out that changes to the course needed to be ongoing, as modules and assignment requirements change from year to year.

CONCLUSIONS

The project has demonstrated that international students can bring insights to the curriculum that EAP practitioners do not always have into disciplinary and genre conventions. Staff-student partnerships benefit teachers, students and institutions and can be part of an ongoing process of curriculum enhancement. An ongoing process of both retroactive and proactive change will allow courses to adapt more easily to the changing demands of modules, degrees, and disciplines.

Setting up a staff-student partnership does not have to be time-consuming. The process could be as simple as: recruiting students, setting a baseline task to gauge the students' reactions, giving the students a choice of task to do after this, and gathering feedback on the task. In the interview stages, notes could be taken rather than recordings, or changes to materials could even be made on the spot.

There are, of course, aspects of the project which require further research and consideration. Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten (2014) warn of the dangers of approaching staff-student partnerships uncritically, and working in partnership might not necessarily be successful in every context. As Chun (2015) points out: "The EAP classroom is a site of power, agency and multiple meaning-makings" (p.2), and we need to maintain constant awareness of these ever-fluctuating dynamics and their interplay.

It is especially important that a staff-student partnership does not turn into a form of "resource leeching", in which talented students are used as a source of free or cheap labour for an overworked and under-resourced ELC (Hadley, 2015). It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to run a successful staff-student partnership project without funding. Ideally, students would be paid for the hours they spend assisting ELC staff. At the very least, students need to have conference expenses paid, which can be considerable. Our very grateful thanks are due to the UKCISA organization, without whom this pilot project would have been impossible.

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